Language Transitioning in Multilingual Contexts

2015 Global Education Summit
@USAIDEducation
#LetGirlsLearn #endpoverty
**Complex Multilingual Contexts**

- Most of the world is multilingual
- Most out-of-school children do not have access to schools in their own language (*UNESCO, 2012*)
- In some countries, the mother tongue languages of up to 95% of the population is not used in instruction (*Kosonen, 2005*)
- Complex multilingualism in urban “slum” communities (*1/6*th of the world’s entire population, *UN-Habitat, 2007*)
Multilingual Literacy Outcomes

• Cannot learn to read a language you do not understand and speak
• Increasing demand for national and post-colonial language
• Documented link between the post-colonial language and socioeconomic mobility and higher wages (e.g. Azam et al., 2011)
• So, how do we nurture multilingual learners?
Choosing the first language

- A language the child understands and speaks well
- Mother tongue or regional language
Teaching the First Language

• Does it have an orthography?
• What is the sound structure (phonology)?
  “zikomo” /z/ /i/ /k/ /o/ /m/ /o/ vs. “enough” /i/ /n/ /u/ /f/
• Do all the letters have one only sound?
• How many symbols does a child have to learn?
  26 in English vs. 400+ in Kannada
• Is it visually complex?

٣
دَ
نَ
حَ
ذَ
Teaching the second (later) language

- L1 transfers and facilitates the L2/Lx
- L1 proficiency is a pre-requisite for L2/Lx reading success
- In all language pairs
- But, how much? Do we know when there is enough?
Results from India

• There is a transfer threshold point
• About 60% on a specifically designed test
• Applicable to most of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and parts of Africa
• Need L1 for success in both L1 and L2/Lx
• Help structure more effective multilingual curricula and policies
Results from India (continued)

Percentage of students above threshold

- Standard 1: 0.05
- Standard 2: 0.3
- Standard 3: 0.7
- Standard 4: 0.9
- Standard 5: 0.9
Preliminary Implications

• Earlier does not equal better
• Introducing L2/Lx after L1 threshold significantly increases probability of success in both/all languages
• Skill-based grouping
• Harness rich linguistic resources of multilingual children to improve literacy worldwide
End of Presentation